

Article

Researching international students: methodological challenges of rebel data

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents findings from a small scale study into the attitudes and preferences of international students regarding support provision at a Scottish Higher Education institution. The article outlines some of the challenges arising from analysing qualitative data from surveys and interviews with international students, and calls into question the use of thematic analysis which systematically reduces and finds patterns in the data, but which fails to capture the singularities of the international student voice. It argues for the reconsideration of the epistemological underpinnings of the international student experience and the methodological tools with which it is explored.

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Introduction

In Scotland in 2015-16, international students represented 22% of the student population (HESA, 2017), making an important contribution to universities, most notably by bringing resources in the form of fees and cultural capital for local students. Support for international students on arrival in the UK and throughout their programme of study is embedded in universities' international recruitment offer and in institutional efforts to secure their retention and achievement. Initiatives which target resources and services to support these students may give rise to deficit thinking which positions international students as in need of 'support'. Jones (2017) points to the ways in which the literature over-generalises the needs and experiences of international students clustering them according to their nationalities, while disregarding factors such as socioeconomic background and linguistic fluency. These factors may have more bearing on the types of support required by students than their country of origin (Jones, 2017). This critical stance on the literature led the authors to question the ways in which thematic analysis was deployed in their investigation into support preferences

amongst international students at a Scottish university. In attempting to uncover and understand the patterns in the data, there was a risk of over-privileging pattern seeking (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2011) while under-privileging the heterogeneity of the students' responses.

Background to the study

In 2016, a University-wide scoping project explored transition support provision for international students and concluded that although there were pockets of support throughout the University, the distribution was uneven across disciplines and clustered around the induction period. Instead of tailored transition support for international students, support was most commonly delivered as inclusive provision for *all* new students (Ecochard, 2016). In 2017, having established what transition support existed, ethical approval was granted to undertake a mixed methods study to explore the University's international students' preferred sources of support and the topics to be addressed by those providing support. International students across the institution were contacted by email to answer an online survey regarding the formal and informal support accessed during their time at the University and their perceptions of the transition support services they received. To supplement the survey, 12 face-to-face follow-up interviews were conducted, using visual methods to map the time and place of delivery of services, and to inquire into students' recommendations for future enhancements (Ecochard et al., 2017).

Battling rebel data

During the analysis, we discovered that the most outstanding feature of the data was not the patterns emerging about students' preferences, but rather the fragmentation of the data and the absence of any coherent pattern. This contrasts with many other small scale investigations such as Allhouse's (2017) which investigated international students' preferences for a social learning space. In that study student responses to a questionnaire were 'limited in range and could be grouped according to a number of themes' (Allhouse, 2017, p.7) which is exactly the outcome that we were expecting from data in our study. Instead, the research team became dissatisfied that the data was being condensed by thematic analysis in ways that obscured the singularity, diversity and richness of the international students' perspectives. Although the research team had had previous success with using thematic analysis following approaches advocated by Saldaña (2009) and Braun and Clark

(2006), with this data set we encountered a number of challenges: specifically, a proliferation, broadening and overlapping of codes (Saldaña, 2009) and difficulties fixing the data within categories. Instead of identifying patterns in the data, the individual narratives revealed in our data refused to submit to our efforts to combine or thematise them.

Rich data and proliferation of codes

The first cycle codes were established deductively in line with the conceptual framework of the study and modified inductively after several readings of the transcripts. Axial codes relating categories to their subcategories were established to reflect key elements of the data emerging during the analysis process and data which did not fit within existing categories (Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). However, accounting for the richness and complexity of the participants' accounts led to a proliferation of axial codes. Far from the clear trends, models and phases dominating the literature on international students, the participants painted a picture that was messy and non-linear, representing the unique intersectionality between their entry route, nationality, and age, subject of study, socio-economic background and personal preferences. When asked about the informal support the participants relied on during their study abroad period, the interviewees described wide and complex networks, including friends and family from home, co-national communities and fellow students at the University, as well as flatmates, societies and clubs, work colleagues and landlords. Major (2005) reports the importance of co-national networks to the adjustment of Asian-born students, but no such pattern could be distinguished in terms of a preference for the main source of informal support among the participants, and interviewees had very different experiences and approaches towards associating with co-nationals more specifically. In fact, some interviewees avoided co-nationals on purpose, and several survey respondents complained there were too many students from their nationality group at the University. On the other hand, one interviewee explained she attempted to form a co-national network but did not succeed. All in all, none of our participants, including Asian-born, reported using a co-national network as their main source of informal support.

As a result, in the case of informal support and across the data set more generally, axial codes were added to account for the striking and unexpected differences among the respondents, leading to a lack of clarity and difficulties in organising the codes into code maps and main themes.

Many and broad codes

Connected to the proliferation of codes, the diversity of accounts also led to a broadening of code definitions which accommodated the numerous diverging and contradictory extracts (Braun and Clarke, 2006, Bryman, 2012). As such, the initial codes comprised a category for the academic challenges of international students, originally defined to include international students' widely documented difficulties with academic skills such as critical thinking, referencing, independent studying or academic writing (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017). The following quote recognizes students' awareness of the differences between academic skills required at home and those required in their new context.

“I’ve seen a lot of people finding difficulties writing their assignment, they don't understand the first thing what to do because in India [...] they give you every single instruction, every single point [...] to write in the assignment, so you just follow the pattern. Here it's completely different.” (Student A)

The interview suggests that some students are completely unaware of the academic skills they are required to demonstrate in their assignments in their new context. Although some of the participants' testimonies aligned with the quote from Student A, the perception of the academic challenge of studying abroad varied greatly. Illustrating this point, a respondent stated: "As it wasn't very demanding, I coped well" (Student B). Moving beyond the question of skills, participants related academic challenge to considerations of quality of education, learning style, course content and structure. Furthermore, what the respondents identified as key academic challenges central to their educational experience were often singular: a steep and unexpected rise in tuition fees, a bad experience with a lecturer or tutor, essential reading unavailable at the library. As illustrated in the examples from Students A and B above, the accounts collected were much less homogenous than the literature led us to expect and singularity was key to each participant. Thus, code definitions were stretched to represent more accurately the experiences of the respondents. This raised the question of the internal coherence of codes for mapping into themes; the alternative, however, was to break the broad categories and contribute further to proliferation.

Overlapping codes

Simultaneous coding is used occasionally in thematic analysis to remediate the matter of ‘fuzzy’ code boundaries (Saldaña, 2009); in this study, the authors had to rely extensively on this technique as the accounts of participants did not fit within neatly bounded categories. For example, the literature distinguishes separate dimensions of the international transition, usually identifying academic, linguistic and sociocultural aspects (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017). For the respondents however, academic, linguistic and sociocultural dimensions of transition are connected and intertwined. In the quote below, the student recounts her experience of induction where some aspects of transition were addressed, but other dimensions were completely absent leaving her feeling uninformed:

“I don't have the feeling it [the induction day] was very informative in the sense of opening a bank account or finding your way around Edinburgh, what you would need for university [...], how to register with a doctor, how to get a sim card for your phone. [...] it was just a brief introduction to what the course was going to be like. I remember some statistics about employability of graduates.” (Student C)

This interviewee expressed the common expectation that the University will provide support and information towards all aspects of her transition to the UK. Students in our study did not understand the various dimensions of transition as separate in the manner of distinct coding categories; as a result, the extract above (Student C) had to be coded in both the academic and sociocultural categories. With a great deal of data presenting this feature of interconnectedness, simultaneous coding became frequent and the content of codes overlapped and boundaries became increasingly blurry.

Fixing data, capturing movement

Transition and transition-related concepts are overwhelmingly depicted in the literature as stage-based models or typologies (Ecochard and Fotheringham, 2017) which in theory, should easily be broken into codes for thematic analysis. The phases of transition for instance, are often divided into ‘pre-transition’, ‘transition’ and ‘post-transition’. In contrast, such organisation, logic and linearity is absent from participants’ accounts in this study and their narratives are characterised by spontaneity and responsiveness, fluidity and movement “from/toward/between/of bodies and their affective experiences” (Taylor and Harris-Evans,

2016, p.11). In the quote below an interviewee explains that she was given the impression that gaining employment would be straightforward, whereas securing the right job was complex, involving several stages and parallel processes:

“In India, they (the agent) told me 'yes you can go apply for (a job)' they didn't tell me you have to go through websites, search for jobs, and you'll have interviews and all that, but when I came here my sister told me 'just go for any job that you get' so I just went to this restaurant, and within a week or something they gave me a trial and then I got a job as a waiter. And after some time I started getting bored doing every day the same routine work so after that I left and one of my friend had this cleaning job, her boyfriend has a company and she asked me if I could help her so I thought ok I'll do that job and she told me she'll pay me also, it's better money, so I was doing for her every week 20 hours [...]. And I also got this internship at the University so I made some savings with that.” (Student D)

Taylor and Harris-Evans's depiction of transitions as a "confusing whirl of emotions, spaces, materialities, people, relationships, histories, affects, responses, demands and expectations" resonates profoundly with our respondents' accounts(2016, p.6). Fitting this “whirl” within bounded blocks of analysis means sacrificing the very essence of transition, which is of movement and of its singularity.

Conclusion

The data from this small scale study contributes to an evidence base for enhancing practice with international students. There is a risk that small scale qualitative studies which emphasise pattern-finding during analysis may obscure the heterogeneity of this group's support needs. International students' experiences of transition create images of movements, forward and backward and transversally, across and between networks, opportunities, circumstances and emotions. Thematic analysis may not always be the best approach to representing and honouring the accounts of international students studying in the UK.

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